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Sacred Embodiment

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Dance 460 – Senior Thesis Project

Sacred Embodiment

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Table of Contents

Resume and Headshot.....	1
Senior Thesis Project: Sacred Embodiment.....	3
A renewed understanding of the participation of the body in sacred being through Christian Theology.	
I. Written Discourse.....	3
II. Bibliography.....	20
Summary of Dance Studies.....	23
Artist's Statement.....	26
Moving to South Africa.....	3

Sacred Embodiment

"It is a curious fact of life in an incarnational faith that the body is so poorly attended to, or worse yet, even reviled."

-Marcia Mount Shoop: *Let the Bones Dance*

"The body is a sacred garment."

-Martha Graham: *I Am A Dancer*

It has been my observation that in modern American culture the way we understand knowing a person focuses on who that person is "on the inside". A person's mind: his or her beliefs, knowledge, personality, etc, are who they are. Taking intimacy a step further, if we believe we have a truly deep connection with another person, we refer to one another as soul-mates. Rarely in the discussion of knowing a person do we reference their existence as a body. Valuing the body is considered materialistic and therefore shallow. I have witnessed the body being dismissed as already overvalued by a societal fascination with the physical beauty of human beings. Conventional wisdom tells us a human being is a mind or a soul, things which can extend beyond the death of the body.

And somehow in this tangle of understanding of what a human person is, our culture holds conceptions of the sacred. We believe that there is something about us, about what we do, about what we surround ourselves with, about who we are, that is special. Sacredness is understood to mean that which is blessed by a higher Grace, which is in and of itself venerable and holy. Humans across time have understood in different ways how each aspect of our world can mix, fuse, and participate in the sacred. When we seek to understand this intellectually, in the mind, we might call it enlightenment. Sacred engagement with the soul we identify as spirituality. But what about the body?

Cultural and religious maxims reinforced the idea that what is important about us, what makes us special as humans, is not our bodies. This understanding is counter rational to human existence and contradictory to much of the history of human thought. Deeper philosophical inquiry into the concept and actuality of embodiment leads to more complex issues. Within Western religious tradition, Christianity specifically, the body is absolutely central, though heavily marginalized in modern Christian discussion.

In this paper I will address cultural attitudes towards the body and seek to discover from where this school of thought, which tends to marginalize the body, arose. First I will establish that the value of the body is in synch with Christian Theology and then I will unravel the ways in which negative associations have been made. From there, I will seek to discover what we mean when we discuss human bodies, and how we derive this understanding and knowledge. With this understanding, I will reconcile cultural, philosophical, and theological understandings of the body in order to determine in what ways the body resides within the sacred and a life lived with the divine.

II. Impetus

How did I arrive at this topic? Allow me to offer some of my own background on pursuing this subject matter. The intersection of my identity most relevant to this question of sacred embodiment is that of a dancer, raised in a Lutheran church in the American Midwest. I have always been a moving body and a reflective, inquisitive type of person. In my middle school and high school years, I found my favorite church participation in a liturgical dance group.

In that context, dance was viewed as a representation of the sacred. We danced as praise and worship, to illustrate a deeper meaning and connection with spirituality and with God. It was

performance, like most dance we come into contact with. While it certainly was experiential, loved and enjoyed by the participants, the experience of dancing was not the primary purpose. The primary purpose was creating a performance that could be viewed. We added culture and enrichment to the service. We kept people awake. We called it Sacred Dance.

Dance was viewed and discussed, unintentionally perhaps, as a means of demonstrating the human attachment to, and adoration of, the divine. Dance was not intrinsically sacred, it represented the sacred. This view of dance is analogous to how we view the body, as an instrument to navigate an earthly existence, with true revelation taking place elsewhere, non-corporally. Dancing was taking place in the front of the sanctuary, but the real action was understood to be “behind the curtain”, not of this world. After all, in heaven one would not have a body. The soul outlasted the body and was therefore more important.

This was the attitude around which I was raised. However, there are several ways in which this causes cognitive dissonance regarding the body, a dissonance I will address when I examine theological teachings later in the paper. This cognitive dissonance was not held at the level of consciousness. There is an anecdotal quote, often attributed to C.S. Lewis (but actually from adult fiction author Abbi Glines), which occasionally pops up on social media. It states “You are not a body, you have a body. You are a soul.” In a family discussion, this quotation was brought up, and I balked, unsure why.

The main justification behind this sensibility that we are souls seemed to be the understanding that the soul outlasted and preceded the body, eternal and therefore central. Perhaps time spent in college as a Dance Major at a Jesuit University had changed me, or made me aware of a new sensibility. I am a body, duration has little to do with it. I knew this, however more explanation was necessary to unpack the rationale that supports this belief. I needed to (and

now will) address some of the relevant historical, cultural and epistemological attitudes that inform my belief system.

III. Theology and Culture

The first step in this journey is exploring Christian Theology in order to establish whether or not marginalization of the body is the result of other Western cultural values, or directly related to Scriptural teaching. This question is difficult, as faith practices and theology are an aspect of culture and therefore constantly influence, and are influenced, by it. From there, with some of the associations of the body clearly visible and unpacked, we can ask central questions about what embodiment means and what the attitudes towards it represent. How, in a sacred context, can we be, and not just have, bodies?

The first indicator that a physical analysis of human relation to the sacred is necessary is our mere participation in a physical world. The existence of a physical universe, of creation, signals that there are things about it to be known and our bodies are our medium for doing so. Beyond that broad understanding, the body is essential to Christian Theology and Sacraments in several very specific and prominent ways.

Marginalization of the body is counter-rational to Christian Theology and its rituals, which are grounded in experience of the body. The way in which adherents of the faith actively recognize the body by encouraging religious practice and worship demonstrates this. By making a time or place relevant to the practice of faith, we already recognize that in order to engage with the sacred in the material world, we need an instrument, our body.

Worship practices and sacred spaces are built around this understanding of human embodiment. Early Christian worship experiences were built off of the Jewish tradition and many early Christians still attended the Synagogues during the first several centuries after

Christ's death (Foley, 9). As more Gentiles entered and shaped the faith, other influences and practices became rooted in the tradition (Foley 9). The incorporation of the body so surrounds us that we forget it at times, as it has naturally made its way into rituals and practices. The use of music, incense and lighting engage the senses. The ways in which various traditions incorporate the posture and gestures of the body in kneeling, making the sign of the cross and positioning the hands for prayer recognize that the body creates and houses divinity.

Theologically, the Christian concept of the Trinity (though it is not necessarily explicit in Scripture, is widely accepted and taught) identifies God in three forms: God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. This is somewhat translatable to a threefold understanding of the human as a mind, body and spirit. It is not the purpose of this writing to argue the truth of this aspect of Christian teachings, factual or otherwise, but to point out that God is clearly identified in bodily form through the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The entire concept of Christology, God the Son, is the study of the human person Jesus. This study of God incarnate offers a wealth of understanding of the virtues of embodiment. Speaking specifically of the incarnation of Jesus, Wendy Farley writes that "the incarnation is the intersection between time and eternity" (Farley 12). Jesus's incarnation as a human person is central to Christian theology because "the incarnation is the unspeakable joyousness that we dwell in at the intersection of Divinity and humanity" (Farley 14). There are several definite instances for understanding this incarnation in modern Christian traditions. The practice of the Eucharist and the teaching of the Bodily Resurrection demonstrate the centrality of the body of Christ to Christian Theology.

The Eucharist, the ritual imitation of the Last Supper of Jesus before his death, involves the body on several levels. The mere fact that a meal, the ingestion of bread and wine, is a central

ritual in the Christian tradition acknowledges the importance of those things which sustain life. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus commands his disciples to eat and drink in this way in memory of him. The memory of Jesus is tied to a meal, a very human and earthly necessity, loaded with meaning. Dietary laws and rituals are highly important in Judaism and so Jesus used a pre-established language of faith to communicate his own significance (Feeley Harnik, 166). In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus tells his disciples that the wine is his blood and the bread his body, forming a new covenant with God.

The biblical telling of the last supper is rather simple, and so incorporation into religious practice has required interpretation and practical translation. The rituals of the Eucharist change and vary substantially with each time period and across the many cultural setting of Christianity (Mazzo xiii). The way in which the Eucharist is practiced highlights a different purpose for the communion. The words and practices of the liturgy are particularly important in Catholicism due to the belief of transubstantiation, that through divine intervention the bread and wine brought to the ritual become the literal body and blood of Christ. This brings even greater importance to embodiment and participation in a form of knowing Christ which is physical.

The resurrection of Jesus three days after his crucifixion offers more conversation on the body in Christian tradition. When you walk into a Western Christian church, the cross is the first symbol you recognize. In Catholic churches it is more often the literal crucifixion, body and all. The story of the life of Jesus climaxes with his death, an experience we consider an essential characteristic of every single human narrative. Scripture teaches that Jesus rose from the dead. This claim has been subjected to nuanced interpretation within various denominations of Christian teaching. However, this is largely understood to be a bodily resurrection, alongside a resurrection or reintroduction of the spirit and the mind.

Jesus returned as a whole person and Sandra Schneiders writes, "...we are necessarily talking about Jesus' bodily resurrection because a human being, a person in the full integrity of their humanity, does not just have a body, but is their body" (12). Beyond the resurrection of Jesus, Christian scriptural teaching tells us that our bodies will overcome death in the same way as Christ's (Schneiders 14).

Jesus's death marks what is meant to be a very human experience and his birth can also be viewed in this way. The Book of Mark tells the story of Jesus's birth and "assumes a normal human birth" or omits any additional details (Moltmann-Wendel 46). The Gospels of Matthew and Luke depict the conception of Jesus in what we might call less normal means, with Mary, Jesus's mother, conceiving with the Holy Spirit and remaining virginal. This has become the widely accepted view. These accounts, however, still link Jesus to an earthly reality, wrapping him in swaddling clothes, etc (Moltmann-Wendel 47). As controversial as this part of the narrative can be as well, the importance of birth is still present. Jesus did not just appear; he was not simply sent. He was made and birthed, sharing in bodily existence.

These are examples of the ways in which the body plays an important role in the Christian religion; however the body has found negative associations that must be given appropriate review. It would be overly simplistic to attribute depreciation of the body to one source, event, or tradition; there is a notably complex history that must be considered. Various thinkers, leaders and movements have had a significant impact on how the body is understood, as well as the terms in which we think of the person as existing. There are aspects of Christian theology which have made us wary of engaging with the body when attempting to reconcile ideas of God and the sacred in our cultural context, despite the centrality of the body in the incarnation of Christ. What we might call Western Judeo-Christian cultural thought is not merely

theological in nature, but is also a culture and a history. That is to say, a word is more than its definition, it is its meaning when used.

A Western writer who converted to Hinduism with the Hare Krishna movement writes about the dilemmas the West has with embodiment. Concerning our history he writes:

We have to overcome certain ideas about God bequeathed to us by our own Judeo-Christian heritage. These ideas make it difficult for more Westerners to understand the divine image... (more significant) for the classical Judeo-Christian idea of God is the later intellectual interpretation of divinity in terms of a negative theology derived from Greek speculative metaphysics with a its disdain for the particular and the sensual (Deadwyler, 73).

He is writing about what the West hails as the great beginning of philosophy, Plato and Aristotle.

I will next address the aspects of the Christian faith and its religious practices and history which influence conceptions of the body. It is then important to separate from the church for a moment to see what influential schools of thought in Greco-Roman culture have influenced our society and established themselves as norms. In this way, a troublesome dichotomy of embodiment has been created in Western thought as ideas have spread and mixed unconsciously.

No discussion of the body is complete without recognition of sexuality. We know the issue of sexuality in the church best today through topics such as premarital sex and priestly celibacy. Sexuality is notably absent from the birth narrative of Jesus, thus creating for some an understanding of its uncleanness. It is noteworthy to mention that in the time period of early Christian writing certain sensibilities about women and wickedness were prevalent, though the words of Jesus steer away from these tropes (Loader 343). Ancient "concerns of property and purity" taint the history of women and carry into modern understandings of sexuality (Loader

343). A need to control women, as exemplified in the biblical narrative of the fall from paradise, influenced ideas of marriage as an arrangement and not as a union between two equals.

When it comes to priestly celibacy, it is important to distinguish ecclesiastical sensibilities and practices from theological ones. In the early Christian church, community and religious leaders were not separated from typical family lives, with husbands, wives and children. In fact, Peter, the first Pope, had a wife and there is no scriptural basis for requiring the celibacy of clergy (Jones). As the church developed and propagated, the monetary wealth of Christian communities grew and issues of inheritance and succession in positions of leadership became sources of tension (Jones).

In the eleventh century, Pope Gregory VII decreed that married priests could not say mass and put his foot down on behaviors such as the keeping of multiple wives and concubines by clergy (Jones). The severity of the law was seen as necessary in order to control the situation; however it is important to point out that it was not sex that initiated the rule. People, power and money were the issue much more than bodies. Later efforts to maintain this practice of celibacy despite campaigns to reopen the conversation for family men to serve in this capacity encouraged leaders to give "the impression that celibacy was of apostolic origin" (Jones). The body became a source of blame.

Another source of caution surrounding the physical world in the Christian tradition has been the prohibition of idols which has "resulted in an understanding of God as a being who by his own intrinsic nature cannot possibly be concretely depicted" (Deadwyler, 73). While idols are prohibited in Scripture, Judeo-Christian practices have always embraced various types of embodiment in the world around us, in art and imagery.

Prominent movements have been the preservation of relics and the creation of religious

icons, particularly of saints (Cox Miller 45). This has possible roots in the history of Greco-Roman influence on early Christianity. Figures who mediated between the spirit and physical realm were familiar to Romans (Cox Miller 46). This iconographic history of "embodying the holy in the form of saints... imagining the relation between the human and divine" has been a mediation between a need for concrete understanding of the sacred (Cox Miller 46).

The spread of Christianity around the Mediterranean Sea contributed to its adaptation in different cultures and the way in which we understand it today. Many ideologies and ideas were at play in first century Palestine where Christianity has its roots and there was significant influence from Hellenistic culture in the region from the presence of Alexander the Great (Foley 1). The Romans were also greatly influenced by Greek ideas, notably Greek philosophy. The great Greek philosophers are still the most prominent thinkers in Western philosophy and taught in all formal educational settings. The philosopher Plato wrote a significant amount concerning human embodiment and the sensible (physical) world. Each successive philosopher has had to address Plato's original works as they are widely influential and in the first several centuries following Christ's death, a type of neoplatonic Christianity was created.

In Plato's writing *Phaedo*, Socrates has lost a trial by the City of Athens and now waits amongst friends for his death sentence to be carried out. In this account, Socrates, through Plato's words, argues that he does not fear death, as it should be welcomed by every philosopher. This preparation for death is an individual's work and Socrates worries "...that other people do not realize that the one aim of those who practice philosophy in the proper manner is to practice for dying and death." (Phaedo 64a, 55). He lays out an argument in defense of this assertion, contending that the soul is immortal and unable to obtain real knowledge while connected to the body. His arguments come to the conclusion that a philosopher, a person who seeks wisdom,

must spend his or her life preparing for death so that he or she can detach from corporeal things and attain what it is that philosopher's seek: knowledge.

In one interpretation of this, the body becomes the impediment to knowledge, a word that can be replaced by a number of many other desirable attributes: purity, wisdom, enlightenment, etc. Some early Christian intellectual leaders found no reason for Plato to influence their teachings. Incorporation of dance and the body in the Church was praised by some, while other early Christians found the Platonic point of view too well established and compelling (Matluck Brooks 2-3). Platonic ideas were appropriated and reconciled with ideas about Christian martyrdom and this aided marginalization of the body in the church as it grew and became established (Siniossoglou 122-126). Christian philosophers fused the vocabulary of platonic existence into their theology and allowed embodied understanding of the rituals and stories of their tradition to be ignored.

Though there have been gaps in conversation about the body in Christian settings, we have now established that the body is highly relevant to Christian Theology. We have also uncovered at least some of the reasons why embodiment has been feared and avoided. With these cultural understandings made visible, the time has come to replace the conventional thoughts of the body with a more nuanced and holistic perspective.

Speaking in terms of the sacred body is not easy, as discussion of the sacred quickly takes us into rough water intellectually. Traditionally, Western theologians have been wary of attributing any positive characteristic to describe God, and by extension what is sacred, preferring instead to simply rule things out (Deadwyler 74). The prevalence of this apophatic approach, saying what God is not, makes Christology appealing because Jesus is someone who feels more familiar. Yet his embodiment is still daunting to discuss in concrete terms as we

imagine Jesus to be different from ourselves. We are scared to discuss things in so concrete a world as the corporeal, a world where we can be proven wrong. The vocabulary of the unchanging and undying metaphysical realm is much easier to manipulate. It is much easier to speak in specifics as it cannot be verified. In order to create a positive theology of the body, to allow the body to be sacred in and of itself, we need to learn a few more things about bodies.

IV. The Person and the Body

The triad understanding of the person as body-mind-spirit (or some variation on these three themes) is not necessarily a comprehensive list of the characteristics of human persons, however it is a helpful place to start. Some people view all aspects of this trinity as equal, while in other accounts, a hierarchy exists. In this hierarchy, the body is essential to life, however it is seen as an aspect of being a human, but not intrinsically a part of the person. The body is an accessory. A greater understanding of the nature and virtues of embodiment has the potential to establish that embodiment is a necessary and significant characteristic of being a human person.

For the sake of this paper, the issue of identity or personhood existing or extending before or after corporeal life is not central. This paper deals with embodiment of the living human being. There are many perspectives on the body and how it is linked to who we perceive ourselves to be. Identity is a tricky and heavily loaded concept, but for the purposes of this paper, let it be casually and incompletely remarked on in the basic societal understanding of an intersection of categories that make up who we are. For this reason it is useful to create boundaries and fully understand what our bodies are. My body is the one with which I feel and sense directly and with which I am able to act (Taliaferro 111). I am unable to do this with other objects around me or with bodies that are not mine.

There are essentially three categories of human identification, tripartite, dualist and

materialist. A tripartite understanding of the categories that make up a person include some variation on the ideas of body, mind and spirit (though sometimes other vocabulary is used). In some interpretations, the spirit or mind is still given primacy as director of expression over the body, closely related to a dualist perspective. Dualists see the human being composed of two parts, a discarnate being and physical one (Taliaferro, 112). A hybrid of the mind and soul, and a body make up the dualistic person (Taliaferro, 112). A materialist, on the other hand, attributes the mind to the brain and sees the body as central (Taliaferro, 133).

I advocate for a tripartite understanding, that respects each of the three categories to be equally important to understanding who we are. Each one has its own way of interacting with knowledge and with others. That our bodies are somehow attached to our being is undeniable when we consider our corporal relations; we need bodies for practical interaction. There is also something about bodies that is right or proper. We have signals that identify when we are hurt, sick, or our body is being held out of order. Though Augustine, noted Christian theologian, theorist and philosopher was not an advocate for bodily inclusion in worship and the lives of Christian adherents, he made several observations that support this idea. He wrote in his seminal work *City of God*, that when the body is held upside-down, it is "perverted" and "distressed", out of harmony (Book XIX, Chapter 12). This upsets the other aspects of our being. At times we are more aware that we are our bodies when we are limited, ill or injured and we see that we cannot fully be ourselves without them (Moltmann-Wendel 1-2). The aspects of our being are entwined, arguably contingent.

There are many virtues of the body, many ways to articulate its utility, that can be used in a religious setting. A "constitutional virtue" of the body is that it provides us with a brain, therefore a mind, therefore an intellectual personhood (Taliaferro 117). The senses allow us to

receive information and contextualize ourselves in the world around us (Taliaferro 116). Agency of our bodies allows us to exert our will and make our intentions actions (Taliaferro 116). However, these virtues of the body can easily be hijacked to support the idea that they are important reasons to have a body, but not to be a body. The body as a support system for all other human functions is a common perspective. It is how we realize our other grand potentials. The body is the means to the ends of our “true” selves, not an end in and of itself.

Making the body a tool which humans use to express their higher potential, an accessory, is much easier than recognizing the centrality of the body and its messy and glorious realities and potentialities. The body has amazing practical uses. The soul and mind also serve us in utilitarian ways, although we still identify them as intrinsically valuable. Humans throughout history have taken the leap of faith that says we are more than our utility. The world contains something we call “sacred”. Body, mind and soul are crucial for conducting a meaningful life and yet they are critical beyond that use. Their ineffable essence, by the mere act of being connect us as a part of the fabric that comprises sacredness long before they are put to use.

V. A Positive Theology of the Body

The issue we must now tackle is how embodiment can be understood and realized as sacred. We must change our vocabulary, no longer equating sacred and divine with the spiritual realm. Thus far, this paper has only argued that the body is religiously important and theologically sacred, however it has not made arguments how that can be understood and practiced. A deeper appreciation for the sacred body is not new, as this paper has argued. It is simply underdeveloped in our modern vocabulary, waiting to be drawn out.

It is a matter of choosing where to place our focus and bringing forward in our consciousness those things which are already understood, if rarely discussed. The body as a

means of knowing is a highly developed school of thought in academia. It is made complex by the reality that the knowledge that we find which resides within the body is difficult to separate out from cultural understandings of the body across the globe (Sullivan, 87). Recognition of our reliance on nonverbal communication begins to give the body some of its power. We understand with our bodies. In the same way, we hold knowledge in them, though the nature of what kind of knowledge that is, and whether it can be translated into cognitive understanding, is a question which could fill several books.

Positive theologies of the body already exist and are in practice. According to Biblical tradition, all things which God makes are good and cannot be "unclean" (Blogg 117). As with all aspects of the world, it is how things are put to use and "if we accept that the body is in itself good, then we must assure that it is used in a rightful and lawful way, and that we perceive it in this way" (Blogg 117). A few examples of bodily inclusive approaches to theology can assist in adopting this understanding more easily and embracing a lifestyle and understanding which moves forward with the body as essential and not *away* from the body. Such theologies as these, which incorporate body, mind and spirit, allow us to fully become, be and die as human persons, another sacred trinity. I will now explore a brief look into some of the ways in which a positive theology of the body can be incorporated into our spiritual and enlightened lives. It is my hope that it will lead us on to discover this understanding more deeply in and of ourselves.

Some of the clearest articulation of a theology of embodiment comes from feminist theologian Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel who writes to rebuild understandings of the body from the slander it has encountered. She writes that in order to move towards a positive theology of the body, we must "mistrust all abstract spirituality which is dissociated from the body, life, earth and social relationships" (Moltmann-Wendel 104). Instead she advocates trusting in embodiment

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that actively involves the spirit and connects fully to life and love concretely. We are to see ourselves as true children of the earth, “indissolubly bound up with it” and the energy that embodiment gives to being in synch with the “rhythms” of the world (Moltmann-Wendel 104-105).

VI. Dance

In order to develop a fully integrated appreciation for our sacred, embodied selves, it may be helpful to focus on the involvement of the body in worship specifically. Subtle inclusion of the body has already been mentioned; one of the more obvious avenues for active and evident incorporation of the body in worship is through dance. What is more fully embodied than artistic manipulation of literal human bodies in a beautiful and experientially positive way? The Bible has many references to dance and “it does not usually appear as entertainment. It was communal, religious expression and although everyone may not have physically taken part, all took part in spirit” (Blogg 12). The dance of the Hebrew women lead by Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, upon crossing the Red Sea comes to mind. Dance as celebration, dance as fully being and thanking God, not demonstrating thanks, but giving thanks, for bodies that had been enslaved and were then freed.

In modern attempts to understand the body as sacred and to incorporate it fully into Christian thought, the dance world has been in the forefront. Sacred dance is a flourishing ministry in the United States. Countless other examples exist of dance which has an explicitly divine impetus and is intended to participate in the stories and culture of religion. American Modern dance is full of such examples, from Martha Graham's physical representation of the life and experiences of Joan of Arc in her *Seraphic Dialogue* to the music and choices in Alvin Ailey's *Revelation*. These dances hold and demonstrate a form of knowing and being that is

sacred in the body. Sacred embodiment is also made evident in dance that is not explicitly religious. Krumpers talk about “striking” or “killin off” as they reach new heights in their dance, filling themselves and their audiences with an electricity and form of understanding that does not require intellectual articulation (Rize 2005).

VII. Personal Conclusion

When I began this research, affronted by societal conceptions of the body, I did not know where it would take me. My ideas about God, sacredness, humans and embodiment have not necessarily changed, however I have. These ideas have been revealed and articulated in new ways as they have been brought to the forefront of my consciousness, changing how I think and act. My relationship to my body and to my faith have deepened significantly. I have a newfound appreciation for Jesus and the fascinating Christian perspective of God embodied.

It has also changed my perspective on dance. By now identifying myself as one third a body, engagement in activities which require me to be a body are liberating and fulfilling in new ways. Dance is particularly special as it holds many opportunities to be a full person, engaging the mind and spirit in the dance as well.

This journey has highlighted additional understandings which this research does not have the opportunity to explore, however are necessary next steps in recognizing the sacred in all elements of human persons. Beyond deeper understanding of the body, I have realized we are all differently shaped and abled in our minds and souls, as well as our bodies. I easily take the leap of faith that all people in their intersections of these three identities of body, mind and spirit commune in the sacred.

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Summary of Dance Studies

Fundamentals of Dance Composition I and II

This course gave students the three elements of dance (space, time and energy/force), the ways of knowing dance (cognitive-aesthetic, affective and kinesthetic), various choreographic devices and vocabulary words. Choreographic prompts encouraged exploration into these categories and elements, with written assignments that allowed the student to recognize personal interaction with the concepts.

Dance Styles and Form

Dance Styles and Forms encouraged students to view dance from different perspectives and take seriously factors like music and environment when choreographing. Learning more about how to analyze these factors, students could make decisions to match or juxtapose their movement choices with the other conditions of the performance.

Laban Movement Analysis

Laban Movement analysis taught students how to view and talk about movement using the categories of Laban notation and Laban movement analysis. Students learned how to notate Direction, Approach to Kinesphere, Effort, etc, as well as recognize tendencies within their own dancing towards certain intentions.

Music for Dance/Drumming

This course encourages dancers to engage with music personally, in a way slightly different than we do while dancing. Doing rhythms together as a group also allows a new type of group learning.

To Dance is Human: Dance, Culture and Society

This course views dance as a pluralistic expression of the human experience. Dance is a medium through which to understand different cultural phenomena such as acculturation, inculturation, prejudice, pluralism and assimilation. Students were encouraged to analyze their own cultural background, complete with forms of identity and with an emphasis on personal story.

Dance History

Unsurprisingly, this class dealt with the history of organized dance, primarily in performance settings. Beginning with court dancing in early renaissance Europe, this class walked through dance history as different codified methods came into being, periods of dance began (and essentially all stayed in one way or another) and notable performers and choreographers emerged.

Kinesiology I and II

The body being the instrument of the dancer, Kinesiology dealt with understanding the human body on a functional level. Kinesiology is the study of movement. Understanding the systems of the body and how we effect them, as well as all the bones, muscles and major ligaments encouraged dancers to exercise thoughtful control over their movement and choices to keep the body operating at an optimal level as well as trained to be as strong, flexible and healthy as possible. Learning the vocabulary and functions of the body also sought to allow students to more articulately discuss and understand techniques designed to make them better dancers.

Principles of Teaching and/or Creative Dance for Children

This course began by talking about the different learning styles, paired with educational approaches of notable thinkers. From these we pulled out categories for means of learning (kinesthetic, cognitive/intellectual, aesthetic and psychological) as well as useful tools in building a class, such as scaffolding the lesson and finding a balance in convergent and divergent exercises. Lesson plans were made based on requirements within the public school system.

Dance as Social Action

While this is a course that I have not taken, in other classes I have had the opportunity to learn about dancers and choreographers who used the stage as a soapbox for social commentary and political advocacy. Additionally, I believe, as do many others, that dance is a tool for empowerment in children particularly, but all people, as are all the arts.

Philosophy of Arts or similar course

In place of this course I will discuss political philosophy. This asks the fundamental question of whether or not humans are meant to form into groups or if they are meant to act as independent agents. This is the difference between society being a necessary evil or good thing. This relates closely to the arts, because without the luxury that society and specialized work afford us, we would not be able to share through art or take the time to develop it as a craft.

Improvisation

In improvisation students were encouraged to move away from their go-to movements in free dance moments. By being given restrictions, students found more possibilities in their movements, as well as the opportunity to focus on concepts not typically thought about, such as unusual choices of contact on the floor, or ideas like opening and closing with the body. This class also allowed students to move in a way not intended to be performance, but just for the sake of moving and dancing.

Ballet

In my many semesters of ballet, various teachers have given varying focus to the vocabulary of dance, as well as strength, technique and specific aesthetics. Generally ballet has served as a space for disciplined practice and a study of shape, form and following directions.

Modern Dance

Modern dance has taken on many different presentations in my time as LMU. Generally the use of technique in a way more natural to the human body has encouraged owning movement more fully, developing the ability to manipulate the body in any desired way and embody performance.

Jazz

All about style, Jazz has been a lesson in taking on a character and sharing it. Jazz has often been the 'fun' side of dance, engaging with pop culture and a rich history of performance.

World Dance

Dance of Hawaii learns the language and vocabulary of Hawaiian dance including directions and orders as well as gestures and specific moves. Dancers learned several pieces together and were given the chance to choreograph for themselves using the steps learned in class. Dance of Africa offered a community of participation learning various steps and stringing them into phrases and traveling patterns. Performing a choreographed collection of these movements was the culmination of the class.

Pilates

With the body as the instrument of the dancer, it is important to keep the body in a state such that it can perform the actions asked of it. Strength training in pilates, as well as discussion of things of detriment to the body, help to make more possible for the dancers, as well as extend their career.

Artist's Statement – Dance

There is something extraordinarily compelling about dance. Throughout my entire life I have enjoyed dance above all other art forms. I used to wonder how anyone could find music sufficiently satisfying when it can be paired with dance. I wondered how anyone could appreciate a painting or sculpture merely for the product and not imagine the dance the artists participated in while physically shaping the work with her or his hands. While I have come to fully appreciate other art forms in their own way, dance will always be special to me.

The intentional manipulation of the body in artistic expression is a deeply intimate and simultaneously communal activity. Dance can be defined through the making of choices by a single individual. The dancer either deliberately chooses to move the body or chooses to surrender to the movements of the body. Dance is one of the purest forms through which a person can fully practice being a body and understanding that aspect of themselves. At the same time, the art of dancing is one of constant sharing by participating in a physical environment. Dance necessitates being in contact with the elements and with our environment, as well as being observable by other sentient beings in the vicinity. In this way, all dance is experiential and all dance is performance, as all dance has an actor and all dance has witnesses.

This, very broadly, is what dance has come to represent for me. Dance transforms both the actor and the witness, whom we have come to refer to as dancer and audience. I find dance transforming in the way in which it manipulates, taking a human gesture and drawing attention to it, making it new or special in some way by giving it that moment to be actively considered by the dancer and the audience.

When dance is performed, I have a preference for dance that challenges: intellectually,

emotionally or physically. The awe that is inspired in me when a dancer defies the typical physical capabilities of their untrained peers is exquisite. So too, the depth of feeling and thought that dance as an art is capable of being and representing gives me satisfaction.

There are many ways in which I believe that this can be achieved. Most obviously, the rigorous training of dancers to develop their bodies and maximize mobility and strength is essential. This offers the dancer the diversity to execute any gesture or movement wanted. I prefer dance and dancers with versatility, not confined to one specific form. I find this traps the dancer in particular tracks of movement, limiting the creative capabilities of the dancer and therefore the level of challenge the dancer can engage with and share. All of this allows the dancer to challenge themselves physically, but also challenges those who witness by reminding them of the potential of the human body.

Similarly, I prefer dance and dancers with broad and well developed intellectuality. I find it best to avoid cliché projects and topics, except when something new can be brought to the idea through dance. There are many things to be said about the universal topics of love and fear, however by zeroing in on something particular about those emotions, instead of relying on tropes and generic representations, the art is brought to a high level of consciousness.

There have been an assortment of influences that have led me towards this understanding of dance. My deeply rooted interest in politics and societal dynamics leads me to be hyperaware of the dancer/audience dynamic and the communal aspect of dance. My appreciation for spiritual and philosophical questing makes me aware of personal exploration and discovery in dance.

When I was in Middle School, I became infatuated with Jerome Robbins' choreography in *Westside Story*. I loved the narrative, with its complex sociopolitical dynamics. The tension and relationships were realized in large movements whose energy reached beyond the bodies of

the dancers, and tiny, repeated human gestures that drew me as an audience back to the scene. This gave me appreciation for the way in which dance is communicative and effective in a social dynamic. Dance changes and engages the world around it. Dance can be used as commentary in a way that words sometimes fail.

Around the same time period, the Martha Graham Dance Company came through my hometown and I attended one of my first professional dance performances. I recall the anxiety I experienced watching *Lamentation*. This piece demonstrates the affective nature of dance, embodying a human experience so personal and devastating, yet generic enough to be relatable, that words would have been insufficient to communicate. The deeply struggle and isolation of the piece stuck with me as well, informing my appreciation for dance.

The several opportunities which I have had to choreograph myself have taught me a significant amount about my personal experience through dance and not just what I appreciate witnessing. I have found that I have a tendency towards Bound and Direct movement in my body. I do not have much patience for small, intricate gesture and footwork, but prefer to move across the space provided and reach into my far kinesphere. Space is vitally important in dance and I have come to embrace the cliché idea that all space is dance space. By never consigning dance to a studio or stage my creative capacity grows.

I have found that I truly do not prefer one genre of music over another or any particular style of dance. While it said that one should not seek to be a jack of all trades, but a master of one, versatility is my favorite defining characteristic as a dancer. I need the deep, resonating bass beat of hip-hop and its heavy, direct motions as much as I need the light, sustained discipline of ballet paired with complex and revealing classical music.

In summation, my identity as a dancer is as complex as my human identity; an

intersection of a thousand titles and ideas that make up my place in the world. Dance is deliberate, appreciative embodiment. I recognize that the most important aspect of my dance identity concerns fusing that understanding of being a body with being a mind and spirit. By doing this, I fully am. I allow myself to enjoy the holistic human experience of being an individual and participating in community.

KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Moving to a City

Pietermaritzburg ~ Durban

In August of 2014 I will be moving to South Africa for a year of service through Young Adults in Global Mission (YAGM). I do not yet know my exact placement in the country, however, several times throughout the year I will be returning to Pietermaritzburg in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal. The YAGM country coordinators for South Africa are stationed there and I will be meeting with them throughout the year for retreats, debriefing sessions and short breaks. It is my hope that during that time I will get some opportunity to enjoy the arts culture of South Africa.

Pietermaritzburg is home to the University of KwaZulu-Natal which has an active Theater Department.

This appears to be one of the primary sources for performing arts in Pietermaritzburg. There are a few dance studios in the city. These include *Ben's Dance Studio* ("For the very best in Ballroom, Latin American, Line Dancing, Modern and Dance Fit!) and *The Studio 1* ("Hip-hop...Dance Fitness...Ballet...Modern...Contemporary").



The closest coastal city of Durban boasts several dance companies from *Flatfoot Dance Company* who call themselves the premier African Contemporary dance company to *Maya Dance Company* who specialize in South African Indian dance. The city also has a school for the performing arts which puts on several shows annually.

While Pietermaritzburg has several museums, most associated with the University, Durban has several Galleries in addition to its museums, and a generally well developed and flourishing artistic community.

